IRISH DRAMA'S HARD FIGHT

Lady Gregory's Strenuous Effort to Found National Theatres and Quell Mobs Dissatisfied With Plays.

Lady Gregory's attempt to establish an Irish national theatre was attended with a tempest. "The Playboy of the Western World" was the storm centre. Lady Gregory relates what happened when the play was first produced at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on January 26, 1907.

By LADY GREGORY.

ON the Monday night "Riders to the Sea," which was the first piece, went very well indeed. But in the interval after it I noticed on one side of the pit a large group of men sitting together, not a woman among them. I told Synge I thought it a sign of some organized disturbance and he telephoned to have the police at hand.

The first part of the first act went undisturbed. Then suddenly an uproar began. The group of men I had noticed booed, hooted, blew tin trumpets. The editor of one of the Dublin weekly papers was sitting next me and I asked him to count them. He did so and said there were about forty making the disturbance. It was impossible to hear a word of the play.

The curtain came down for a minute, but I went round and told the actors to go on playing to the end, even if a word could not be heard. The police, hearing the uproar, began to file in, but I thought the disturbers might tire themselves out if left alone, or be satisfied with having made their protest, and I asked them to go outside but stay within call in case of any attempt being made to injure the players on the stage.

There were very few people in the stalls, but among them was Lord Walter Fitzgerald, grandnephew of the patriot, the adored Lord Edward. He stood up and asked that he and others in the audience might be allowed to hear the play, but this leave was refused. The disturbance lasted to the end of the evening, not one word had been heard after the first ten minutes.

Next day Mr. Yeats arrived and took over the management of affairs. Meanwhile I had asked a nephew at Trinity College to come and bring a few fellow athletes that we might be sure of some able bodied helpers in case of an attack on the stage. But, alas! The very sight of them was as a match to the resin in the pit, and a roar of defiance was answered back, townsman against gownsman, hereditary enemies, challenging each other as they are used to do when party or political processions marched before the railings on College Green. But no iron railings divided pit and stalls, some scuffles added to the excitement, and it was one of our defenders at the last who was carried out bodily by the big actor who was playing *Christy Mahon's* slain father and by Synge himself.

I had better help from another nephew. A caricature of the time shows him in faultless dress with unruffled shirt cuffs leading out disturbers of the peace. For Hugh Lane would never have worked the miracle of creating that wonderful gallery at sight of which Dublin is still rubbing its eyes, if he had not known that in matters of art the many count less than the few. I am not sure that in the building of of our nation he may not have laid the most lasting stone; the fear of a charge of nepotism will not scare me from "the noble pleasure of praising"; and so I claim a place for his name above the thirty, among the chief of our own "mighty men."

There was a battle of a week. Every night protesters with their trumpets came and raised a din, every night the police carried some of them off to the police courts. Every afternoon the papers gave reports of the trial before a Magistrate who had not heard or read the play and who insisted in being given details of its incidents by the accused and by the police.

We held on as we had determined for the week we had announced the play for. It was a definite fight for freedom from a mob censorship. A part of the new national movement had been, and rightly, an attack on the stage Irishman, the vulgar and unnatural butt given on the English stage. We had the destroying of that scarecrow in mind among other things in setting up our theatre. But the societies were impatient; they began to dictate here and there what should or should not be played.

Mr. Colum's plays and Mr. Boyle's were found too harsh in their presentment of life. I see in a letter about a tour we were arranging: "Limerick has not yet come to terms. They have asked for copies of proposed plays that they may 'place same before the branch of the Gaelic League there.'"

At Liverpool a priest had got up an entertainment, and they did not like one of the plays and hooted, and the priest appeared and apologized and said he would take it off. In Dublin Martin Harvey, an old favorite, had been forced to take off after the first night a little play the subject of which was Irish belief in witchcraft. The widow of a writer of Irish plays that had been fairly popular was picketed through Ireland with her company, was nearly ruined, no one being allowed to enter the doors, and finally at some midland town was allowed only to produce a play after it had been cut and rearranged by a local committee made up of shopkeepers.

We would not submit Mr. Synge's work or any of the work we put on to such a test, nor would we allow any part of our audience to make itself final judge by not allowing others to hear and judge for themselves. We have been justified, but Synge's name has gone round the world, and we should have been ashamed forever if we had not insisted on a hearing for his most imaginative work. But had it been a far inferior play and written by some young writer who had never been heard of we should have had to do the same thing. If we had been obliged to give in to such organized dictation we should of necessity have closed the theatre.

I respected the opinion of many of those among that group who were sincere. Not used to works of imagination and wild fantasy, they took the wild fable seriously and supposed that Synge's strange images were literal representations of Irish life, quarrelling, as it were, with shadows on the wall; and found the lad who seemed to have killed his father an affront to our national honor instead of an imaginary being living in a fantastic world where it was possible to kick the stars and beggar the man at the roulette table because he had come to think himself "a likely gaffer in the end."

The same fable written by a realist would have been intolerable, and Synge could have been one if he liked. I myself consciously lift my comedies out of common life by some extravagance of idea or of language, that the imagination may play more freely and the bubble catch some radiance from fancy's prism before it breaks. Yet before that breaking one must have given the illusion of reality as the old juggler gave it at *O'Ceallach's* house, sending hare after hound up a silk thread.

It is not my business in "spreading the news" to prove that melancholy gathers to itself by affinity the hosts of trouble or that newsmongering is the besetting sin of gloom; but it is my business to make an audience feel convinced for half an hour that they themselves are on the outskirts of a scattered sort of a fair and that *Bartley Fallon* and *Jack Smith* will have a bad time of it in their cell. Synge had the same method. He did not paint reality, but chose from it what was "superb and wild."

The methods of those who objected were another thing; when the tin trumpets were blown and brandished we had to use the same loud means and call in police. We lost some of our audience by the fight; the pit was weak for a while, but one after another said, "There is no other theatre to go to," and came back. The stalls, curiously, who appeared to approve of our stand, were shy of us for a long time; they got an idea we were fond of noise and quarrels. That was our second battle, and even at the week we had won it.

But Synge's fantasy is better understood now even by those "who have never walked in Apollo's Garden," as the "Playboy" holds its place in the repertory at the Abbey every year.

The experiences of the Irish Players in America were just as strenuous. Lady Gregory was not wholly prepared for this, for she writes of her visit in the fall of 1911:

"Boston is a very friendly place; there are so many Irish there that I had been told at home there is a part of it called Galway, and I met many old friends—some I had known as children, sons of tenants and daughters, now comfortably settled in their own houses.

"I had known of the nearness of America before I came, for I remember asking an old woman at Kiltartan why her daughter, who had been home on a visit, had left her again, and she had said:

"'Ah, her teeth were troubling her and her dentist lives at Boston.'

"England, on the other hand, seems a long way off, and there are many tears shed if a child goes even to a good post over the channel.

"Two dear old ladies came to see me, daughters of an old steward of my father's. One of them said she used to 'braid my hair' as a child that I might be in time for family prayers, and had wept when she saw the snapshots in the papers when I landed, and found I was so changed. She said weeping, 'I hope the people of America know you are a real lady; if not, I could testify to it.' And I was able to write to my son of the well being of tenant's children."

Warning of trouble came early. "The Playboy" was announced for October 16, and on the 11th the *Gaelic American* printed a resolution of the United Irish-American Society of New York, in which they pledged themselves to 'drive the vile thing from the stage.'"

The progress of the company through New England was marked by hostility in one town after another. An amusing feature of the situation was that upon occasion after occasion it was demonstrated that those who assailed "The Playboy" and other plays most furiously had never read the acting versions and were criticising things that did not exist. They reached New York in November. Lady Gregory writes of the opening at Maxine Elliott's Theatre:

"We opened very well last night, a crowded house and very enthusiastic. 'Rising of the Moon,' 'Birthright' and 'Spreading the News.' All got five or more curtains. One man made rather a disturbance at the fight in 'Birthright,' saying it was 'not Irish,' but his voice was drowned and he left. I was told that —, one of the enemy who was there said, 'Such things do not happen in Ireland; they may happen in Lady Gregory's own family.'

"'Playboy' is to be put on next week. J. Q. [John Quinn, the New York lawyer] seems a bit anxious about 'Playboy,' says they may 'throw things,' and that seems what the *Gaelic American* is inviting them to when it says 'The Playboy' must be squelched,' and a lesson taught to Mr. Yeats and his fellow agents in England, and that I have no right to appeal for respect for my sex."

But Lady Gregory was not without sympathizers.

"November 24—I have been to-day to lunch with Mrs. ——, a Catholic lady I had met in London, who gave a lunch to me to show she was on our side. There was a Father X. there, who is not in this diocese and is very much shocked at the action of the priests [who denounced the plays]. One told his congregation on Sunday from the altar it would be a mortal sin to come to the plays, and another, Father X. says to his certain knowledge, advised his people from the altar if they did come to bring eggs to throw. Mr. Hackett was sitting behind a woman who said in 'Birthright': 'It's a pity it ain't Lady Gregory they are choking.' Mr. Quinn learned I held a salon at the theatre, and it is wonderful how many people turn up or come to express sympathy."

As the performances went on the sentiments of the opponents of the Irish Players increased in intensity.

"November 27—When John Quinn came yesterday afternoon he brought —— with him. Both had heard from different sources that 'Playboy' is to be attacked to-night. The last *Gaelic-American* says: 'The New York Irish will send the anti-Irish Players back to Dublin like whipped curs with the tails between their legs.' Quinn heard it from a man he knows well, who had called him up to say there is a party of rowdies coming to the theatre to-night to make their demonstration. They thought it possible this might be stopped by letting the enemy know we are prepared, but I thought it better to let them show themselves. They have been threatening us so long, we shall see who they are."

This is Lady Gregory's account of the row at the theatre on November 28.

"The papers give a fairly accurate account of what happened last night. There was a large audience, 'The Goal Gate' was put on first, which of course has never offended any one in Ireland, but there was a good deal of coughing going on and there was unrest in the gallery. But one man was heard saying to another, 'This is all right. You needn't interrupt this. Irishmen do die for their neighbors.' Another said, 'This is part of "The Playboy" that is going on now, but they are giving it under another name.'

"Very soon after the curtain went up on 'The Playboy' the interruptions began. The managers had been taking much too confident a view, saying, 'These things don't happen in New York.' When it did happen there were plenty of police, but they wouldn't arrest any one because no one gave the order and they would have been much worse had not '——, who knows the police superintendent in charge, gone out and insisted he should arrest any one making a noise. But it was let go on nearly all through the first act.

"I went round when the disturbance began and knelt in the opening of the hearth calling to every actor who came within earshot that they must not stop for a moment, but must spare their voices as they could not be heard, and we should do the whole act over again. At the end Tyler came around and I was delighted that he shouted that it should be played again. O'Donovan announced this and there were great cheers from the audience. And the whole play was given then in perfect peace and quiet. In the box office this morning they have a collection of spoils left by the enemy, chiefly 'stinken pots' (?) and rosaries. A good many potatoes were thrown on the stage and an old watch and a tin box with a cigar in it and a cigarette box. It was complete victory at the end."

Then Col. Roosevelt came to Lady Gregory's aid:

"I was in such a rush last night I sent off my letters very untidily. I hadn't time even to change my dress for dinner. It went off very well—John Quinn, Col. Emmet, grandnephew of the patriot; Mr. Flynn. I had asked Peter Dunne (Mr. Dooley), but he was engaged to dinner at 8 at the Guinnesses but came at 7 and sat through ours, very amusing, and he and Roosevelt chaffed each other.

"Roosevelt came into the hall where we were waiting. 'Pitchforks would not have kept me away, now you have been attacked,' he said. Two of his chief helpers in politics had come to him during the day and said it would be very injurious to him to come to 'Playboy,' but he said, 'Look here, if I deserted Lady Gregory I should be a yellow cur, just a yellow cur.'

"When we got to the theatre and into the box people saw him and began to clap and at last he had to get up and he took my hand and dragged me on my feet too and there was renewed clapping.

"Toward the end of 'Goal Gate' there was a great outbreak of coughing and sneezing and then there was a scuffle in the gallery now and then during 'Playboy,' but nothing violent and always great clapping when the offender was chucked out. We played with the lights up. After the first act I took my party on to the stage and introduced the players and Roosevelt spoke separately to them and then made a little speech, saying how much he admired them and that he felt they were doing a great deal to increase the dignity of Ireland the has adopted my phrase) and that he 'envied them and Lady Gregory for America.' They were quite delighted and Kerrigan had tears in his eyes.

"His daughter, who was with another party, then appeared and he introduced her to them, remembering all the names. 'This is Mr. Morgan, this is Miss Magee,' &c. I brought him a cup of tea and it was hard to tear him away when the curtain went up.

"I stayed in my room writing letters through the second act and when I came back a swarm of reporters was surrounding Roosevelt and he was declaring from the box, 'I would as soon discuss the question as discuss a pipe dream with an outpatient of Bedlam.' This was about an accusation they had just showed him in some paper saying he had had a secret understanding with some trusts. He was shaking his fist and saying, 'I am giving you that straight; mind you take it down as I say it.'

Of course Lady Gregory believes that the opposition was organized and she quotes the following from a letter from Yeats:

"Shaw has just sent me a copy of an interview he is sending to the New York SUN; he says you are 'the greatest living Irishwoman,' and says you will beat the Clan-na-Gael as you beat the Castle. He makes a most amusing and ferocious attack on the Clan-na-Gael and says they are not Irish. But I forgot, you will have it read before this reaches you. I hope he will not have left you all in the plight the little boy was in after Don Quixote had beaten his master. He will at any rate have amused New York, which does not care for the Clan, and all fuel helps when one wants a fire. I am pleased that he has seen the issue—that we are the true Ireland fighting the false."

Further along she records this:

"A nice matinée yesterday. My friend the wild Irishman who comes to the theatre tells me the Irish are 'waiting for us in Chicago, but I don't see what they can do."

Lady Gregory's arrival in Philadelphia was pleasant:

"PHILADELPHIA, January 29, 1911.—I am staying here with Mr. and Mrs. Jayne, in a beautiful house, with great kindness from my host and hostess. We opened very well last night, a very appreciative audience, and Mr. and Mrs. —— gave a supper afterward for me and gave me an immense basket of roses.

"We dined on Sunday night with Dr. Furness, the old Shakesperian scholar, went by rail and had to walk a little way to his house, four degrees above zero, but so still it didn't seem cold. There has been a good deal of snow and the streets are very slippery, and it is impossible to walk at all without galoches.

"Mr. Jayne after dinner went to a meeting of a philosophical society founded by Franklin. He brought back philosophers and learned men of all sorts. We talked on astrology and my having once walked down the tube of Lord Rosse's telescope. And he told of Herschell having his telescope brought to him when he was old that he might look at Orion and remember it as his last view of the heavens.

"The Jaynes and some of the philosophers went on to a ball at the Assembly Rooms, and I was invited. It gave me a sense of Philadelphia being a community of its own very entertaining.

"The Rev. John —— called on me yesterday, sent in a message I used to teach him his catechism at Killinane Church. I had forgotten; but remembered him, a little Protestant boy. Something made me ask what church he belonged to. 'Catholic,' I said 'My catechism didn't do much good then.'

"'Yes,' he said. 'I was an Anglican clergyman for a great many years.'

"'Why did you change?'

"'Because of authority. I wanted authority, and I cannot give up the belief in the divinity of our dear Lord.'

"'But we believe that.'

"'No, it's being given up little by little, and the Bishops seemed uncertain. I wanted authority.'

"When we parted we talked about Roxborough thirty-eight years ago. I said, 'We must say a little prayer now and again for each other.' He said, 'Will you please say a great many for me.'"

But the storm soon broke at the theatre. The whole company was arrested, and Mr. Quinn rushed on from New York to the rescue. Of the examination before the Magistrate Lady Gregory says:

"The liquor seller, our prosecutor, was the first witness; had only stayed till *Shaugheen's* 'sons of a Christian man' was left in *Michael James's* hands; he made a disturbance then and was turned out, but was able to find as much indecency even in that conversation as would demoralize a monastery. His brother, a priest, had stayed all through and found we had committed every sin mentioned in the act."

Of course "The Playboy" made trouble in Indianapolis and Chicago and elsewhere in the West, but Lady Gregory records a final victory in each instance.

Lady Gregory.

RICCARDO MARTIN'S AGONIZING ORDEALS WHILE GAILY SINGING

"Music lovers who sit blandly in orchestra chairs week in and week out and suspect that the life of the professional singer is a path of roses from which all hardship and anxiety are removed and upon which the sunlight of content sparkles unceasingly should acquaint themselves with facts," says Riccardo Martin of the Metropolitan Opera Company, foremost of American tenors.

"If these peaceful souls could catch a glimpse of what is going on behind the scenes—under the paint—in the hearts, from which are voiced the melodies that soothe and enchant audiences, now and then a great shock would result. It is indeed a joy to sing before great bodies of intelligent listeners and to be liked and applauded, and the opera singer plies his vocation with enthusiasm and respect for his responsibilities.

"There are certain times when a singer is obliged to appear at a performance when he runs extreme risks. Even the good health of the average vocalist does not prevent occasional severe illness or intense pain. Suppose slight illness attacks a soloist an hour or two before the time of appearance on the stage. The victim of the attack does not know how serious the trouble is or what may be in store for him. Hopeful that the indisposition may pass away he refrains from notifying the manager. When the curtain is ready to rise on the evening performance he stands in the wings in his makeup, dizzy and weak. He knows that it is now too late to withdraw, there is no alternative, he must sing the performance. It may mean failure, disgrace, harsh criticism and complete collapse, but nevertheless he must sing.

"'Oh, but, one is nerved up at such a crisis and merely uses his reserve strength,' some one may observe. In reply to this let me say that, in the first place, reserve strength is a will-o'-the-wisp when most sadly needed. It is not a great storehouse of superfluous energy, as many persons think, but the final spark that may make or break the machine. Unquestionably the odds are against the singer who appears in an operatic rôle under such conditions. Even under the most favorable circumstances one of a dozen emergencies may prove sufficient to prevent the soloist from doing justice to himself. The percentage of risk in public singing is vastly greater than is commonly supposed. Colds are insignificant compared with poor acoustics, inefficient accompaniment, indigestion or an agitated state of mind. The latter causes are sometimes unavoidable, but the average listener does not take them into account when he remarks that So-and-so's voice is not as clear as might be.

"As for my own experiences, there have been times when it has not only been hardship but intense agony to sing, when the obligation to appear in a given operatic rôle or at a concert engagement has rested heavily. The first time that I appeared as *Iolan* in 'The Pipe of Desire' at the Metropolitan Opera House three years ago, it was under conditions that I shall never forget. I had a severe cold and symptoms of the grip, sufficient to have kept most persons in bed, and attended all rehearsals feeling utterly miserable. The result of refusing to lay up was the development of an abscess of the frontal sinus. The pain was one of the worst any human being can suffer.

"The performance was on a Thursday. On the day before it became evident that an operation was necessary if I was to appear. At 2:30 o'clock on Wednesday this took place. After a local application of cocaine the surgeon bored a hole through the nose into the sinus with a rotary electric drill. A catheter was introduced and the cavity was disinfected with a warm solution. On the following morning at 10:30 I sang the dress rehearsal, just sixteen hours after the operation. It wasn't much of a rehearsal for me. I could not put on my costume or makeup and most of the time was spent in clearing my throat of blood and mucus which kept falling. The pain was intense and there is no doubt that I ran the risk of my life. Part of the time during the rehearsal, when I was obliged to lie on a couch while the ballet girls danced about me, the dust was raised about my head till I was nearly stifled.

"The ordeal of singing the performance beggars description. Time and time again I thought my faintness would overcome me and I was continually obliged to turn my back to the audience to clear my throat of the blood which flowed from the wound. When the curtain went down on the last act I was unconscious and was carried to my dressing room. Two hours later I was revived and found myself sitting up in bed with cold chicken in front of me. For two weeks I was confined to my bed.

"Once in a while it becomes the lot of a singer to keep an engagement under circumstances which from a different aspect are equally difficult. We hear of cases where soloists, immediately prior to going upon the stage, have received word of the death of a near relative. The control necessary to face a large gathering and sing interpret compositions of many moods is in some respects greater than that required by the General who orders the defeated remnant of his troops to charge an entrenched enemy. The latter becomes superhuman and loses his identity in the mad conflict, but the singer must be calm, thoughtful and winning no matter how bitter the irony of it and how great the mental strain.

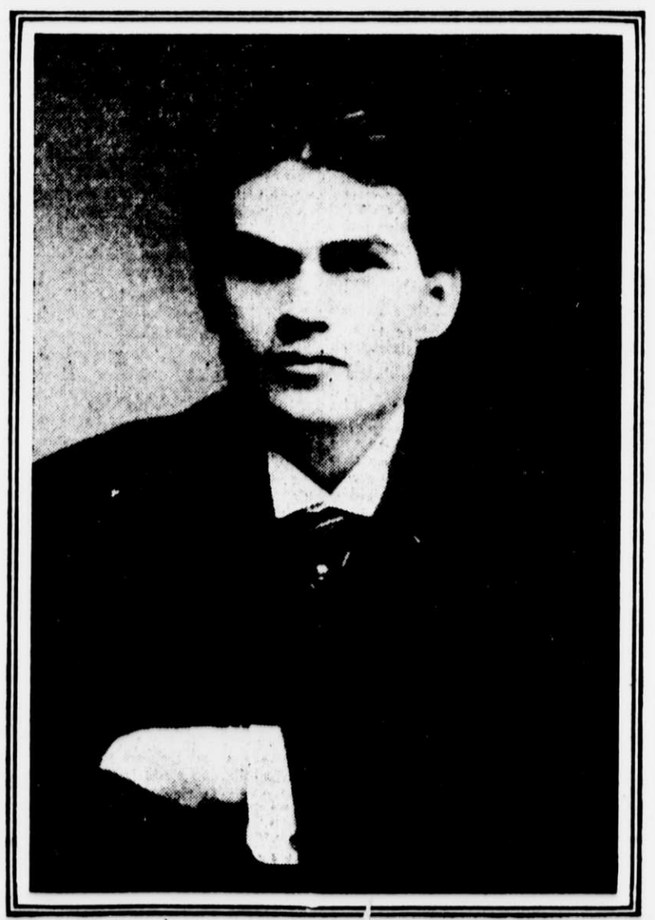
"Three years ago I sang 'Madame Butterfly' in Covent Garden when it proved a memorable ordeal. A tooth had become bothersome and at 1 o'clock on the day of the performance the pain became so intense that I called up the opera house and obtained the name of a dentist. The latter started to work fifteen minutes later. It was 6 o'clock when he finally succeeded in removing the crown of the supposedly dead tooth that was causing the trouble. The tooth was so sensitive that the slightest touch nearly caused me to jump out of the chair. The dentist got into the roots of the tooth and found an abscess which he treated and in a short time I felt better. But the session left me in poor condition for the duties of the night. When I appeared as *Pinkerton* that night my mouth was so sore that singing high notes, which require the mouth to be opened wider, was like being hit on the head with a hammer. Nevertheless it was necessary to smile and look happy and I believe that none of my hearers knew that I was in abject misery.

"When I last sang in Sacramento the trunk containing my evening suit failed to arrive. There was only a short time before I was to appear at the concert. After endless inquiries I found a costumer who essayed to fit me to a suit which he had in stock. I appeared in due time at the auditorium in a most remarkable attire. The trousers were so big that they flapped in the breeze at each step, and the coat was just right for a man half my size. All I could see in front of me throughout the performance was an enormous expanse of protruding shirt front. Rudolf Ganz, the pianist, who appeared on the same programme, politely suggested that if we could arrange the intermissions between numbers to allow more time he would change suits with me for each number. After careful reflection I decided against this course and determined to brave public gaze. It has always been satisfying to me to recall how courteous the people of Sacramento were. In spite of my circus appearance there was no display of mirth, nor was anything thrown. I was in good voice and sang with excellent results. The newspapers spoke of me in high terms of praise, although one daily after conceding me the possession of a voice observed that I did not seem to put my soul into my work.

"Occasionally great success comes to a singer under very trying conditions. One of the most perfect performances of 'Aida' that I ever sang was directly after an attack of tonsilitis. This occurred two seasons ago. I had gone to bed on Sunday night with fever and the next day the doctor said I had tonsillitis. It was my first attack of this kind. On Tuesday I tried to get about, but fainted and went back to bed, where I remained until Friday. That night I dressed, went to the opera house and filled the rôle as I have mentioned. The Metropolitan Opera House people were so sure that I could not appear that they had provided a substitute and his costume and wig were hanging in the dressing room. Although there were patches on my throat as large as quarters I was in excellent voice and felt considerably elated at the outcome of the performance.

"The hardships of touring embarrass the efforts of concert singers considerably. Rushing from town to town, eating irregularly, sleeping in draughts on hard beds or going without sleep in express trains do not fill the singer's soul with cheer nor contribute to velvety tones and magnetic appeal. No wonder that diverse reports of a singer's ability come to his sponsors. Last fall I sang seventeen times in thirty-five days.

"Just as the life of the actor is vastly different from the picture of ease and self-satisfaction which he frequently presents, the professional singer's career has many hardships and involves genuine toil and unceasing diligence. A fortune may be made or lost on the merest turn of chance and a slight misstep may result in a serious tumble. Eternal watchfulness is demanded, that the voice may give its best and the song have a lasting echo."



RICCARDO MARTIN.

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